

“Women have always been the ones to change my life”: Gendered Discourse in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

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I Introduction

Midway through Salman Rushdie’s Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight’s Children*, the omniscient narrator Saleem Sinai makes the claim that “women have always been the ones to change my life” (220). This statement is particularly significant given the connection that the text posits between Saleem and the newly independent state of India. From the moment of his birth, Rushdie’s protagonist tells us in no uncertain terms that he and his country are one and the same: “I had been handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (MC 3). In this context, it is difficult not to read his subsequent remarks as a commentary on the role of women with respect to the nation. Unfortunately, neither the portrayal nor the function of women in Rushdie’s landmark book is quite as simple as Saleem would have us believe.

Following the publication of *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, the passage quoted above became a flash point for critics who wanted to investigate Rushdie’s treatment of gender. There is no question that Rushdie has a problematic rapport with women and with feminism in general. Despite writing a number of essays condemning the Islamic world’s oppressive treatment of women in social, political, and economic spheres (Mann 194) the female characters that feature in his own writing have variously been praised and condemned by critics. From a personal standpoint, it was this remarkable spectrum of opinion that first sparked my interest in this topic. The claim that I make in this essay is twofold: firstly, I argue that the central discourse of hybridity that Rushdie privileges in *Midnight’s Children* is an inherently gendered construct. Secondly, I argue that negative elements within this discourse are overwhelmingly mapped onto female characters through the strategic use of misogynistic stereotypes. In contrast, male characters remain by and large positively coded. The text therefore espouses a national narrative that, for the most part, either views women as a destructive force or else excludes them altogether.

II Feminism and Rushdie

Early feminist critics of Rushdie were uncompromising in their view that his work consisted of a series of wholly misogynistic texts. Many of the more hostile articles were spurred by the 1983 release of *Shame*, a fictionalized history of Pakistan after independence that places the question of female oppression at the heart of its story. In an extremely influential critique, Inderpal Grewal took issue with Rushdie’s authorial style in the novel, arguing that: “there is a disjunction between the mode of inclusion in which the narrative is written and the authoritative stance of the writer. . . that breaks down the coalition between the writer and women” (125). Similarly, Aijaz Ahmad castigated Rushdie for producing a “gallery of women who are either frigid and desexualized. . . or demented and moronic. . . or dulled into nullity. . . or driven to despair, suicide, and sheer surreal” (1467). Nor did Rushdie’s less explicitly female-oriented works escape their fair share of scrutiny; writing about *The Satanic Verses* in the wake of the Rushdie Affair, where the author found himself the target of

a *fatwa* issued by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini that mandated his immediate execution, Gayatri Spivak notes that despite "his anxiety to write women into the narrative of history" (82), Rushdie places his female characters within a confining "gender code that is never opened up, never questioned" (83). The key problem for all these critics where Rushdie is concerned is probably best summarized by Catherine Cundy, who observes that, "women [in Rushdie's novels] are invoked to prove a point about social injustices and inequalities, and then effectively demeaned. . . or marginalized by the writing itself" (17).

By the late 1990's, a more sympathetic view of Rushdie's novels began to emerge among feminist scholars. Many of these critics assert that although Rushdie's portrayals of women are often problematic, he is relentless in his determination to challenge patriarchal structures of oppression. For example, Justyna Deszcz maintains that in its reworking of the "Beauty and the Beast" fairy-tale, Rushdie's *Shame* "can be treated as a postmodernist feminist subversion of. . . Euro-American androcentric culture" (94). Similarly, Samir Dayal is convinced that in *Shame*, Rushdie deliberately "undermines the authority attached to masculinity" (45). Other critics remain much more skeptical, though not quite as vociferous as their predecessors. According to Ambreen Hai, women in Rushdie's novels function as an allegory for his own identity as a postcolonial writer, and in many cases they possess "a distinct oppositional creativity" (17). Unfortunately, the potential progressiveness of this metaphor is undercut by Rushdie's constant reversion to a sexist, masculine style of narration. Harveen Sachdeva Mann is of the same opinion, explaining that despite his attempts at feminist discourse in *The Satanic Verses* and *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie "largely fails to champion the cause of women" (Mann 294). Amidst this cacophony of voices, the one reliable truth that emerges is that Rushdie is not, in Ahmad's words, "a misogynist, plain and simple" (1466). Instead, he is an author whose depictions of gender are slippery, as they continually defy the attempts of critics to circumscribe them.

III Central Discourse as Gendered Construct

The essential theme of *Midnight's Children* is hybridity, which can be loosely defined as the commingling of ethnicities, religions, cultures, identities, and narratives. The importance of this concern is demonstrated in virtually every facet of the novel, including its setting. Much of the book takes place in Bombay, a metropolis that is "decidedly heterogeneous, polyphonic, and impure" (Khanna 401). The city's introduction gives some sense of this relentless plurality, as Saleem recounts its history and expansion in a veritable torrent of words:

But then, the Portuguese named the place Bom Bahia for its harbor. . . the city grew at breakneck speed, acquiring a cathedral and an equestrian statue of Manhratta the warrior king Sivaji. . . Coconuts are still beheaded daily on Chowpatty Beach, while on Juhu Beach, under the languid gaze of film stars at the Sun'n'Sand Hotel, small boys still shin up coconut palms and bring down the bearded fruit. (MC 103)

The tone of this passage is not rushed, but rather reverent; Rushdie sweeps the reader along on a whirlwind made up of continually overlapping stories. In this way, Bombay as it appears in *Midnight's Children* is analogous to the text itself, as its "form [is] multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country" (*Imaginary Homelands* 16). The diversity of Bombay stands in stark contrast to the repressive, cramped atmosphere of Karachi, to which the Sinai clan eventually decamps. Over the next few years, Saleem is forced to watch his family fracture and eventually disintegrate under what he deems to be "the insidious spell of that God-ridden country" (MC 335). The ultimate loss of plurality is symbolized by Saleem's inability to commune with the *Midnight's Children* Conference. In Pakistan, the narrative ceases to "constantly throw up new stories" (IH 16); it does not teem so much as plod. Thus, Rushdie clearly demarcates the boundaries between heterogeneous and homogenous worlds, glorifying the former and disparaging the latter.

According to Stuti Khanna, “paternity, lineage, purity of blood, and religion become secondary [in *Midnight’s Children*] to affective bonds forged in community settings” (406). Among these enclosed worlds is Methwold’s Estate, where Saleem reaches adolescence surrounded by colorful, eccentric characters and the magician’s ghetto, where he is reunited with Parvati-the-witch. Importantly, both of these locales are dominated and in a sense protected by men. Methwold’s Estate owes its name and its construction to Saleem’s possible father William Methwold, and its list of residents is basically a catalog of powerful males: Homi Catrack, the “film magnate and racehorse-owner” (MC 107), Mr. Dubash, “a physicist who would become the leading light at the Trombay nuclear research base,” (MC 108) and Commander Sabarmati, “who was one of the highest flyers in the Navy” (MC 108). In contrast, the wives and daughters of these illustrious figures are respectively: Toxi Catrack, the idiot who spends her days locked in her bedroom, Mrs Dubash, “beneath whose blankness a religious fanaticism lay concealed” (MC 108), and Lila Sabarmati, an adulteress with “expensive tastes” (MC 108). Thus, while the men are wealthy, accomplished, and ambitious, the women are either flighty, mentally deficient, or borderline insane. A similarly unbalanced dynamic prevails in the magician’s ghetto. Despite being a powerful sorceress, Parvati-the-witch plays second fiddle to “The Most Charming Man in the World” (MC 435), Picture Singh. From one perspective, the failings of the women at Methwold’s Estate could be interpreted as Rushdie’s critique of the lack of social and physical mobility allotted to women in Indian society. This possibility was explored by Nicole Weickgenannt, who argues that, “*Midnight’s Children’s* criticism is directed at the nation, which is not prepared to let women shape it in an equal way” (76). Similarly, the lionizing of Picture Singh might say more about Saleem and his need for paternal reassurance than it does about Parvati. It is still noteworthy, however, that in these diverse communities where Saleem feels most secure, women are granted only secondary status. Unlike Saleem therefore, they are not totally included within the narrative of archetypal pluralistic societies.

The third, and in many respects the most important, community in the novel is the Midnight’s Children Conference (M.C.C.). Telepathically brought together by Saleem on his tenth birthday, “the 1,001 Children of Midnight, born at approximately the same moment as India’s independence from Britain, seem to serve as allegorical representatives of the new state” (Juraga 176). The members of this unusual organization hail from every imaginable caste and locale, and possess an astonishing array of abilities:

From Kerala, a boy who had the ability of stepping into mirrors. . . a Goanese girl with the gift of multiplying fish. . . and children with the power of transformation: a werewolf from the Nilgiri Hills, and from the great watershed of the Vindhyas, a boy who could reduce or increase his size at will. . . near Jalna in the heart of the parched Deccan I found a water-divining youth. (MC 227)

This inclusionary utopia is relatively illusory however, and Saleem is quick to note that, “the midnight miracle had indeed been remarkably hierarchical in nature” (MC 260), since the most potent children were also those born closest to midnight. Alongside this power-based ranking is a subtler, but no less significant, gendered hierarchy. Shiva and Saleem, as the only two children who were born on the stroke of midnight, consider themselves the natural leaders of the M.C.C. Parvati, who is presumably the earliest-born woman, is content to support Saleem’s candidacy rather than making any claim of her own. Here, she acts not in her own interests, but in order to “fulfill an individual male psychic need” (Natarajan 401). Rushdie’s allegorical model for India is therefore implicitly androcentric, and “colludes in the engendering of the nation as male” (Natarajan 408).

Beyond setting, it is apparent that Rushdie’s desire to “eschew any notion of purity” (Juraga 169) in *Midnight’s Children* is expressed primarily through male characters. The clearest example of this practice is Saleem Sinai, who embodies the principle of hybridity on almost every possible level. Switched at birth with his rival Shiva by the future pickle entrepreneur Mary Pereira, Saleem’s lineage is steeped in uncertainty. Is he William Methwold’s son or Wee Willie Winkie’s? Or, as he maintains, is he for all intents and purposes the child of Ahmed and Amina Sinai? Further

complicating this genealogical picture is Saleem's "gift of inventing new parents for [himself] whenever necessary, the power of giving birth to fathers and mothers" (MC 120). In this way, Saleem is cast as the ultimate mongrel, with origins so tangled that they can hardly be deciphered. In addition to his ancestry, Saleem's magical telepathic abilities transform his consciousness into an overflowing vessel of multiplicity. In the very first chapter he claims: "I have been a swallower of lives. . . consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me" (MC 4). From the outset, therefore, Rushdie presents his narrator as "an elaborate melting pot" (Juraga 184) who carries within himself a limitless number of disparate elements.

Aside from Saleem, there are a number of other men in *Midnight's Children* who are portrayed as the torchbearers of a secular, progressive, hybrid mentality. At the beginning of the novel, Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz has only just returned to Kashmir after five years spent studying medicine in Germany. His prolonged exposure to a different culture has given him "an altered vision" (MC 5) of the world that prompts him to abandon his orthodox Muslim beliefs. In addition, Aadam's secularity later leads him to expel his daughters' religious tutor, who "was teaching them to hate. . . Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians" (MC 42). In this moment, Rushdie frames Aadam as a one-man crusader against the corruptive, exclusionary influence of religious intolerance. To some extent, this is also the case for Aadam's son and Saleem's favorite uncle Hanif. Hanif is a very successful Bollywood director, and his first film causes a sensation because it features the debut of "what came to be known as the indirect kiss—and how much more sophisticated a notion it was than anything in our current cinema; how pregnant with longing and eroticism!" (MC 162). Hanif's willingness to challenge restrictive social and religious norms is of a piece with his father's actions. In contrast, women in *Midnight's Children* are mostly seen reinforcing these standards. Saleem's sister Jamila becomes a religious superstar within the Muslim world, decades after Aadam's mother is appalled when he instructs her to come out of purdah (traditional Muslim practice of female seclusion, involving veiling and physical segregation). Furthermore, Rushdie juxtaposes Hanif's film premiere with the revelation of Gandhi's assassination, emphasizing the nation's shift into a new and potentially transformative era. Men, however, unquestionably dominate the ideological space in which this transition is nurtured.

The purpose of this section is firstly, to demonstrate that the fundamental discourse in *Midnight's Children* is one of hybridity and secondly, to establish that within this narrative, men are overwhelmingly given primacy. I do not mean to suggest that Rushdie's approach contains no element of intentional sociopolitical commentary, or that his male characters are simply one-dimensional vehicles for particular ideals. For example, after Hanif's suicide, Aadam experiences a false religious vision (in reality, the figure he sees is not God but the decaying ghost of Joseph D'Costa) that causes his previously firm atheism to mutate into a frenzied, fatal desire for revenge. Despite including these ambiguous moments, Rushdie consistently asserts the centrality of men, who are usually positively coded, while consigning women to peripheral roles. The discourse that he puts forth in *Midnight's Children* is not the universal narrative that it purports to be, but rather a fundamentally gendered creation.

IV Female Sexuality and Physicality

Writing about *Shame* in 1991, Aijaz Ahmad noted that, "throughout, every woman, without exception, is represented through a system of imageries which is sexually overdetermined: the frustration of erotic need. . . appears to be in every case, the central fact of a woman's existence" (1467). This is an audacious claim, but it is by no means an unfounded one. In almost every Rushdie text, there is at least one woman whose beauty compels men to bend over backwards for her: Pia Aziz in *Midnight's Children*, Arjumand Harappa in *Shame*, Aurora Zogoiby in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Qara Kóz in *The Enchantress of Florence*, and the prophetess Ayesha in *The Satanic Verses*. Even if you exclude these exceptional beauties, the ratio of attractive women to attractive men in Rushdie's

books is so lopsided that it borders on ludicrous. In this area, *Midnight's Children* is by no means an exception: Saleem, Shiva, Nadir Khan, General Zulfikar, and Ahmed Sinai are all described as homely, while Parvati-the-witch, Jamila Singer, Masha Miovic, Emerald Zulfikar and Lila Sabarmati are all surpassingly lovely. Even female characters who appear only briefly are illustrated according to their sexuality; the most complete portraits of women in the M.C.C. other than Parvati are of Sundari the beggar girl, whose stunning face was scarred to prevent her from blinding people, and the unnamed twin sisters, who “despite their impressive plainness both possessed the ability of making every man who saw them fall hopelessly and often suicidally in love” (MC 225).

What do we make of Rushdie's fixation on female appearance, and more problematically on female sexuality? According to Cundy, “women and their sexuality offer both security and the threat of loss of identity” (13). Thus, when Parvati hides Saleem inside her wicker basket to smuggle him out of Bangladesh, she is symbolically offering him refuge within a deeply personal space, creating an intimacy that has sexual undertones (Cundy 13). The other textual moment that undoubtedly fits this model is when Amina (then Mumtaz) spends months caring for Nadir Khan in his underground prison. Like the liminal space into which Parvati makes Saleem disappear, the Aziz's cellar becomes a domain outside of reality where Amina lives out the married half of her “double life” (MC 61). For Cundy, Rushdie's depiction of female sexuality is troubling not because of these individual scenarios per se, but because they are only a part of the broader “nurturer/destroyer dichotomy” (13) into which he places all women. Within this binary, women can either use their sexuality to confer male identity, or to destroy it. Such is the case with Jamila Singer, who banishes her brother to the outer reaches of the Pakistani army as punishment for his forbidden feelings towards her. As a result, Saleem completely loses his memory and becomes the emotionless figure of the Buddha. In a more straightforward example, Cundy cites the incident in the Sundarbans where Saleem and his fellow soldiers encounter the sexually voracious and potentially fatal disciples of the goddess Kali (14). The issue with Rushdie's tendency to place sexually attractive women on such a narrow spectrum is that it deprives their characters of any meaning not directly related to men. As purely sexual beings, “the female characters overwhelmingly re-enact stereotypical male typologies of women” (Mann 296). By and large, the women of *Midnight's Children* are deprived of the agency that is necessary for them to assume an active role in the novel's central discourse.

Never one to do things by half measures, Rushdie lays out the ugliness of the few women in *Midnight's Children* who are neither young nor sexually attractive with gusto, eagerly describing moles, wrinkles, unsightly hairs, and obesity. Alia Aziz, Naseem Aziz, Sonia Aziz, and eventually Amina Sinai are all portrayed in this ugly light at one point or another. Weickgenannt sees this recourse to misogynistic stereotypes as “a conscious and multi-layered strategy” (65) that Rushdie uses to confront the assumption that “Indian women. . . [must] represent the essence of Indian culture and the core of the authentically Indian nation” (66). By this logic, Rushdie's depiction of certain female characters as repulsive caricatures is not actually sexist, but instead a demonstration of the fact that Indian women cannot become empowered without being perceived as “a national menace” (Weickgenannt 72). While this explanation has some merit, I posit that Rushdie's willingness to demonize women has a second, less admirable function; it allows him to incorporate into his narrative a series of explicitly antithetical figures who represent the exact opposite of the values espoused by the discourse of hybridity. These women are the blank pages onto which Rushdie inscribes the dark underbelly of his imaginary history, chronicling the nation turned nightmare through the paradigm of female monstrosity (Natarajan 407).

V Mapping Misogyny: the Washerwoman, the Reverend Mother, and the Widow

Midway through her article on feminized artistry in Rushdie's works, Ambreen Hai makes the following observation:

This rendering of even positively valorized women in terms of eating, or hungering extends into Rushdie's continued horror of grandmothers or matriarchs, always rendered as sickening or monstrous forces of consumption, a threat to masculinity, extending from the register of the narratival to the sexual and the political. (40)

Though it is only tangentially related to her thesis, Hai makes an excellent point in this passage that instinctively rings true. Certainly it is not difficult to survey Rushdie's novels and extract from them elderly women who are as impossibly gruesome as their younger counterparts are beautiful: Rosa Diamond in *The Satanic Verses*, Bariamma in *Shame*, Epifania da Gama in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and to a lesser extent Hamida Bano in *The Enchantress of Florence*. Nowhere are the negative traits that Hai identifies more apparent, however, than in Naseem Aziz, the fierce Reverend Mother of *Midnight's Children*. Naseem is initially viewed only in her constituent parts through a perforated sheet, and after her marriage she becomes a "prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witch's nipples on her face" (MC 40). Weickgennant places the reference to witches within a larger "leitmotif, which underscores the ominous aura of women in the novel" (77). More generally, Rushdie applies tropes of physical ugliness and degeneration very differently to men and to women. For men, dismemberment "symbolizes national rupture" (Natarajan 401), which explains why Saleem experiences all kinds of physical ailments (deaf in one ear, finger sliced off, hair loss). For women, however, it is explicitly linked to the exigencies of family. Sundari's father slices up her face so she can join the family business as a beggar, Naseem is reconstructed as the hideous Reverend Mother upon her marriage, and even the resilient Amina begins to decline during her third pregnancy: "the weight of her four decades grew daily. . . in her fourth month she was already an old woman, lined and thick" (MC 380). Although Saleem attributes his mother's condition to the poisonous interference of his Aunt Alia, the link between motherhood and physical deterioration remains significant as an indication of Rushdie's antagonistic relationship with patriarchy.

Right from the beginning, the Reverend Mother is presented as totally at odds with the principle of hybridity. On page 39, Saleem notes that she was "unified and transmuted into the formidable figure she would always remain" (MC). Naseem is the very definition of stasis: flexibility and fluctuation are not in her nature. Intransigent to the core, "she lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties" (MC 40). The militaristic language that Rushdie uses in this quote is both comedic and revelatory, underlining that Naseem is a veritable bastion of homogeneity. In addition, as a character that deals almost exclusively in ultimatums, Naseem is an oppositional force in a book that champions the process of asking questions, seeking compromises, and blending together disparate stories. On two separate occasions she attempts to resolve marital disputes by issuing uncompromising demands: refusing to feed her husband when he fires the religious tutor, and taking a vow of silence in protest at Nadir Khan's presence. Weickgennant notes that both these "conflicts have ironic Gandhian overtones as he used hunger-strikes and regularly purified himself by means of vows of silence" (69). There is a comedic element to this conflation of renowned resistance tactics with the bickering of an elderly couple, which is only heightened by the Reverend Mother's complete lack of resemblance to Mahatma Gandhi. Nevertheless, Naseem's edicts have serious consequences. Faced with actual starvation, Aadam's "body become[s] a battlefield and each day a piece of it [is] blasted away" (MC 43). Later on, the house is engulfed by a fetid "bog of muteness" (MC 56), which is diametrically opposed to the raucous parliament of the M.C.C. that will soon congregate inside Saleem's mind. Furthermore, Rushdie emphasizes that Naseem's behavior goes beyond mere truculence, as she feels that "Aziz's

death would be a clear demonstration of the superiority of her idea of the world over his" (MC 43). Although Naseem is ultimately "unwilling to be widowed for a mere principle" (MC 43), the dispute between her and her husband has distinctly ideological roots. In some ways, we can read the Reverend Mother as a slightly less villainous precursor to Khattam-Shud of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* in that both characters attempt to impose on others a rigid, authoritarian discourse that overwrites all other alternatives.

The Reverend Mother's ceaseless need for control is primarily manifested in her unwavering command of the domestic sphere. According to Sarah Upstone, the domestic space in *Midnight's Children* is "a site of power contestation" (271) for both genders. This assertion is fully supported by the two textual examples that I have already cited, both of which stem from disagreements over who should or should not be admitted to the home. Upstone also affirms that Rushdie deliberately portrays these spaces as prison-like in order to illuminate "the connections between domesticity and colonial patriarchy and the continuance of these connections in nationalist ideology" (270). The Reverend Mother's role in this setting is therefore paradoxical in nature; notwithstanding the authority that she appears to exercise, "the security of [her] home is so hyperbolic it becomes an imprisonment" (Upstone 270). Although Upstone's reading provides a valuable perspective on the relationship between gender and domesticity, she fails to consider how the Reverend Mother's particular style of domestic management interacts with Rushdie's central discourse.

One significant aspect of Saleem's narrative is his quest for form: every national event must somehow be woven into the tapestry of his life. Rushdie's intention is not to support this endeavor but to demonstrate its impossibility. In his own words: "as [*Midnight's Children*] nears contemporary events, [it] quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more 'partial'" (IH 13). As a result of this change, the connections that Saleem draws between his own existence and the history of the nation become increasingly tenuous. In keeping with the values of heterogeneity, Rushdie's text proves to be centrifugal, even though its narrator believes himself to be centripetal. In this respect, the Reverend Mother is much closer to Saleem than to Rushdie because she too is obsessed with order and with form. On page 41, Saleem describes the various rules according to which her home was run:

And at the dinner table, imperiously, she continued to rule. No food was set upon the table, no plates were laid. Curry and crockery were marshaled upon a low side-table by her right hand, and Aziz and the children ate what she dished out. . . A fortress may not move. . . [and] Reverend Mother's iron grip upon her household never faltered. (MC)

Everything in Naseem's world is tailored to her exact specifications, just as Saleem would like to tailor India's history to fit his own life. Once again, we return to Upstone, who sees the home as an allegory for the postcolonial nation. Admittedly, she proceeds to argue that Rushdie undermines this conception through "a reclamation of the home from colonial metaphor to maintain the "house as house", rather than seeing it in the service of something larger" (263). Nevertheless, the parallels between house and nation that she proposes suggest that Saleem and the Reverend Mother are metaphorically engaged in much the same activity. The fact that Reverend Mother is successful while Saleem is not only enhances her negative coding. Once again, she is shown to be the incarnation of a force that contradicts the formless ideal Rushdie espouses for the nation.

As Hai noted in her analysis, matriarchs in *Midnight's Children* are regularly cast as explicit threats to masculinity. Certain critics have argued that this aspect of the novel should not be taken too seriously because it is mostly intended to accentuate Saleem's paranoia and his paralyzing victim complex (Weickgennant 73). Nonetheless, Rushdie uses the imagery of consumption and monstrosity with such frequency that he quickly moves beyond ambivalence and textual strategy to the point where he relies exclusively on misogynistic tropes to prove his point (Weickgennant 81). One of his preferred allusions is to woman-as-vampire: Picture Singh's wife Durga the washerwoman is "a bloodsucker lizard in human form" (MC 513), while Naseem Aziz is a succubus whose "strength of will seemed to increase as Aziz was ground down by age" (MC 123). This image of previously

vital men being pulverized into irrelevance by the weight of their wives is less recognizably sexist but is still monstrous: Saleem claims that Picture Singh, once “the greatest man I ever met” (MC 457) is brutally “flattened” (MC 513) by the influence of his wife.

The most extreme example of emasculating womanhood in the novel is neither Naseem, nor Durga, nor even Saleem’s crazed Aunt Sonia. Instead, Saleem reserves the bulk of his vitriol for Indira Gandhi, otherwise known as “the Widow”. In her 1996 article, Katherine Frank notes that Rushdie’s selection of the “widow” nickname was no mere coincidence, as “widow-baiting is a time-honored literary activity” practiced by such luminaries as Charles Dickens (251). Rushdie’s portrayal of Mrs. Gandhi goes far beyond baiting however. She appears only in the last few chapters, yet she annihilates both the magician’s ghetto and the M.C.C. While in prison awaiting sterilization, Saleem is visited by the Widow’s Hand (also a woman), who explains why he and his brethren were targeted for destruction: “basically, you see, it is all a question of God. . . the people of India. . . worship our lady like a God. Indians are only capable of worshipping one God” (MC 503). In this way, the Widow justifies the castration of the midnight’s children as the elimination of the danger posed by their diversity. Such heterogeneity has no place in the homogenous India that she envisions. In the figure of the Widow Rushdie skillfully combines the two narrative threads of women as the enemies of hybridity and women as a debilitating menace to masculinity.

VI Conclusion

The wealth of research and discussion surrounding women in Rushdie’s work is a testament to the complexity of his gender politics. This essay offers a feminist critique of one of these novels, *Midnight’s Children*, modeled on what Aijaz Ahmad calls “a symptomatic reading: the concentration on a symptom which is itself vividly central but one which may also, in the same sweep, give us some understanding of structure as a whole” (1469). In my case, the symptom is a steadfastly negative coding of women, while the structure is an inherently gendered central discourse. From a feminist perspective, the problem with *Midnight’s Children* is not that Rushdie presents examples of grotesque womanhood; in no way does having female villains necessarily make a text sexist. Instead, the key issue is that by relying on persistent misogynistic tropes, Rushdie drains these characters of their potential for depth and complexity. Furthermore, his narrative style reinforces what Inderpal Grewal has referred to as the “Self-Other opposition in which women [are] patriarchally reified” (125). The fabric of the novel is dependent upon this “othering” of women such that they are framed as adversaries of Rushdie’s privileged narrative of plurality and hybridity. Like Ahmad, I would emphasize that my reading is in no way a sufficient one, since a book as expansive and intricate as *Midnight’s Children* has an equally illimitable set of possible interpretations.

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